

## **Good Walt**

He hasn't always been here. I enjoyed a good seven years as the only child. But that all changed after picture day. More precisely, it changed when I brought the pictures home from school. They were your run of the mill school pictures; an assortment of wallet size photos and a few larger ones to share with relatives. I wore a green and yellow Izod shirt and brown corduroy pants all topped by a mop of disheveled blond hair. Typical 80's third grader.

Mother took a special liking to an 8" x10" photo and by the next day it was framed and hanging in the hallway. From the moment I noticed it hanging there, I felt as though it was a picture of someone else.

You'd think a mother would pick up on that sort of thing, wouldn't you? Shouldn't a mother, of all people, recognize her own child? Instead she praised me for finally taking a nice picture, she said it showed my sweet side. If I had known, I would have disposed of it. I would have thrown it into the river and let it float away. Orthodox Christians do that with their icons when they are too worn to be used in their ceremonies and I've always admired the reverence behind the practice, but I guess that's neither here nor there.

A few days later it happened. I was sitting in our living room watching the afternoon cartoons when I saw something dart across the hall to my room. It was only from the corner of my eye, but sometimes your peripheral vision can be very keen. I thought it was just my reflection at first, only it was wearing the same yellow and green shirt and corduroy pants from the picture.

After that, I would see myself almost daily, mousing around the house from the corner of my eye- always wearing the same green and yellow shirt with brown pants.

I thought I was my imagination at first, but the sightings were unmistakably real.

He generally showed up when Mother was in the house. If she was

doing dishes, he'd be watching from around the corner; he'd follow her down the hall; he'd spy on her in the yard from the attic window. He kept his distance, but he was always following her, wearing the same cherubic expression as the photo.

And then he started to act. Dishes did themselves. Laundry was folded and put away when left out. They were always little chores, the kind you might think you absentmindedly did yourself then forgot about. But they were always done, and I always got credit.

Mother would say "thank you" out of the blue with her radiant smile. She would say, "that's a good Walt for putting away the dishes," or "what a nice thing to do, folding your own laundry." Every time, I would catch sight of my little doppelganger absorbing the praise from the corner of my eye.

Every act of kindness and every bit of praise emboldened Good Walt. I think mother thought I was trying to fill the role of man of the house since Father died.

As I grew older and puberty started to kick in, Good Walt continued to stay the same. He wasn't me. He was some pale reflection of the son I could have been. He was the one mother continued to love throughout my trials and tribulations of junior high and high school. I tried so hard to rebel, so hard to get into trouble, but good Walt was always there to patch things up before mother found out. Cigarettes would mysteriously disappear from my sock drawer, Playboys would vanish from between the mattresses, and the botched vivisection on the neighbor's cat? Let's just say that old Mrs. Stephens never saw the blood trail that painted her porch that night. I almost felt bad for her, seeing her tacking missing posters to the utility poles the next morning. Okay, so I may have had a chuckle or two, but if you had seen that mangy creature frantically trying to escape- determined it was being pursued by the intestines trailing from the flaps in its abdomen- well, you get the picture.

I was a good student. I knew that good grades were my only escape from this small town and I can't tell you the elation I felt

when Good Walt didn't follow me to college. The dutiful son decided to stay at home to keep Mother company. Those were the best years of my life. I was finally free of my diminutive self constantly getting between me and my desires. And the city? It's everything you can imagine and more. The food, the nightlife- it's magical, manifold even, catering to every desire.

But two years into graduate school, my world came crashing town. A late night phone call and the next thing I know I'm racing to the hospital to find Mother waiting in ICU. Good Walt beat me there, of course, but there was nothing he or the doctors could do. She passed minutes after I arrived. I caught sight of Good Walt sitting in the back seat on the ride from the hospital. He was grieving.

Her funeral was pleasant enough. I never realized that Mother knew so many people. They all paid their respects to me and offered to help in any way they could. I thought I had ended a chapter of my life until I looked up from the grave and saw her standing several yards away watching her own funeral. But like the photograph, there was something different about her. Mother was always sweet and genteel, but this mother wore a look of scorn that I had never seen before. Good Walt noticed her too and cowered like a whipped dog. I nearly burst out laughing.

I had helped Mother by co-signing on an equity loan on the house. Without an income to speak of and bills to pay, I was forced to leave school and move back. Dr. Coleman at the community college was nice enough to offer me a job teaching literature and, ten years in, I realized that this will be the rest of my life.

It's lonely being one of the few educated people in this hellhole. Oh, don't look at me like that, you know you feel the same way I do. You said as much in the poem you recited in class last semester. What was that verse again, something about being marooned in a cocoon, solitary and reaching? I don't remember the verse exactly and forgive me if I say that it wasn't particularly well written. I don't mean to insult you, it's just that nobody in that class has ever penned anything that wasn't deserving of

being incinerated. A lost art, I guess.

Anyhow, it wasn't the poem, but the sentiment behind it. About being alone and out of water. This isn't where you want to be, but you also know you'll never leave even though you have nothing keeping you here. A paradox. Like me returning to the town I loathe to live with my eternally youthful copy. You see, I know just how you feel, that's why I invited you over. Though I must admit that I can't take all the credit, Good Walt helped too. Those flowers you found on your doorstep yesterday? That was his doing. I think you remind him of Mother- you share the same warmth, the same radiant personality, and I think he sees the same loneliness inside you.

Please don't, you're just going to make this harder on all of us.

I miss Mother too sometimes. But that's not why I asked you over tonight. I know what you're thinking and I can assure you it's not that. I mean there's a certain something to the confirmed bachelor poetry teacher who wants nothing more than to spend every moment with his mother, but that isn't the case here. Can I be honest? I'm the same as you. I know that you're the only person in this town that I could be happy with. But there's something missing. I know you agree- I can see it in your eyes. Imagine the gift that is: a slight alteration that transforms two people who are compatible but not in love into soul mates. What would Byron say about that? Something great, no doubt. Do you realize how lucky we are?

Maybe not Good Walt, of course, but you, me and New Mother will be so happy. I guess that's Good Walt's paradox. He had to have known what would happen if he helped me, but it's like I said before, he must see so much of Mother in you. Right down to her loneliness. Maybe it was her loneliness that caused him to appear in the first place. The kind of loneliness that means everyone will assume you just up and left like you'd always said you would.

Struggling isn't going to solve this. Can't you see I'm trying to help you. I know how miserable you are. How empty. I can fix that.

For both of us. Admit it, wasn't dinner wonderful tonight? Didn't you feel the sense of family you've been longing for? Didn't you feel a connection? I know I did. The four of us sitting down to a proper meal together? I apologize about what I put in your wine, but it was the only way I could think of. Things could get out of hand if you struggled, and then where would we be?

See, that was barely a pinch, not nearly as bad as you'd think it would be. Not like that time with the cat. Why you're looking more beautiful already. You can see them now can't you? Do you see how happy you've made New Mother? And why not, it's no small thing, welcoming a new daughter-in-law into her home. I know Good Walt must be grieving, but he'll warm up to the new you. He chose you after all. You're probably wondering about all this mess. But it's like I said, Good Walt would never let me get into trouble. I'm sure he'll treat it all with reverence of an icon.

Now why don't you take a moment to all get properly acquainted while I prepare the dessert?